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ABSTRACT

Action-learning, activities designed to give students the opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge in practical situations and to learn via participation, is a popular concept aimed at restoring relevancy to the public schools. Vocational and occupational curriculum, experience-based academic programs, and various volunteer and career education opportunities are all considered types of action-learning programs. Although there are shortcomings and problems involved in instituting action-learning programs, public school districts (especially in large urban areas) are devoting considerable effort and resources in the area of experiential learning. The Urban Education Studies (UES), in an effort to identify and examine successful action-learning programs in the urban setting, surveyed 29 large school districts and made on-site visits to five of these districts. Based on the UES findings, eight major trends in action-learning projects were identified. After summarizing the findings, the following generalizations were made: past experience in traditional vocational and occupational programs has been extended to a diverse and broad spectrum of career opportunities; the objectives of action-learning programs are such that the community, students, industry and business are able to identify and support them; and the inclusion of personnel with practical work experience and the availability of resources provide new dimensions and the flexibility required by the action-learning programs. However, the evaluation of action-learning programs is not matching the speed of innovation of new curriculum. (EM)

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CAREER EDUCATION AND OTHER FORMS OF ACTION-LEARNING

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CAREER EDUCATION AND OTHER FORMS OF ACTION-LEARNING

by

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The concept of students being provided the opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge in practical situations, or to learn via participation is not new to the educational community. The development of vocational education in the public schools was initiated in 1917 with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act. Although the original enactment was very limited in nature, succeeding state and federal legislation has broadened the scope by providing public school students with relevant instruction based on societies' needs. In many cases these programs incorporate on-the-job training or cooperative placement opportunities. The concept of "learning through doing" has become a well established mode of instruction in the American schools. The methodology has been used not only in vocational and occupational courses but also in science, physical education, and certain social sciences.

Renewed interest in the experience-based education approach was sparked by three independent reports on youth and schooling.[1] The reports argue that the school is not adequate as a pervasive environment for the attainment of the widely different objectives required for the transition from youth to adulthood.

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[1] "Youth: Transition to Adulthood", by the President's Science Advisory Committee (James Coleman, Chairman). "The Education of Adolescents" by the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education (John Henry Martin, Chairman); "The Reform of Secondary Education" (B. Frank Brown, Chairman). Youth Policy in Transition (Rand: Santa Monica, CA). p. ix.

Reevaluation of educational objects were made based on concepts such as those summarized by Coleman: the development of student skills necessary for economic independence and for occupational opportunities; effective management of one's own affairs; engagement in intense, concentrated involvement in an activity; experiencing persons different from oneself both in culture and age; and having others dependent on one's actions.

Based on the call for change and the need to act on problem areas within the present system, educators began the broadening of existing programs and establishing new ones aimed at the restoration of relevancy to the public schools. The term "action-learning" was coined to encompass the spectrum of programs that were developed to meet the needs of the student. Included in this array of programs are the vocational and occupational curriculum, experience-based academic programs, and various volunteer and career education opportunities.

In an article in the NASSP Bulletin, Gary A. Deutschlander defines action-learning as "...planned activities organized through a school that provides a chance to learn by doing."[2] The 1974 Wingspread Conference on Action-Learning sponsored by the NASSP developed four general benefits of action-learning programs:

a) They provide learning experiences that youth otherwise would miss; service to others, responsibility for others, interaction with various age groups, gaining competencies for work, and becoming

[2]Gary A. Deutschlander, "Action-Learning -- The Curriculum Beyond the School", NASSP Bulletin, No. 385, November 1974, p.33.

involved with the working world of adults.

b) They provide some assurance to youth that adulthood is coming closer. In response, youth attitudes and actions mature.

c) They broaden an understanding of the real world.

d) They help provide elements important to the conditions for learning, i.e., motivation, experience, transfer of training, association and verification.[3]

While educators were hailing the advent of the restoration of relevancy, they did not neglect to caution against certain pitfalls associated with this strategy. Alexander M. Moore voiced the following concerns:

Action-learning programs are not primarily

a) "alternative" programs which are parallel to but separate from traditional school.

b) to be used to remove from the classroom those students who are too difficult, too alienated or militant to remain within the daily routine of a classroom.

c) a channel for getting to those students who have great difficulty with the basic skills of reading and computation.

d) directed at reducing poverty or satisfying student's desire for spending money.[4]

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[3] NASSP Bulletin, No. 385, November 1974, p.75.

[4] Alexander M. Moore, "Evaluation and Action-Learning Programs", NASSP Bulletin, No. 385, November 1974, p.66.

More general problem areas were reported by the Rand study, Youth Policy in Transition.[5] Their comments, with respect to the three above mentioned reports can be summarized as follows:

1. Findings reported by the three studies are not conclusive, as very few of them have been verified as continuing trends.
2. The recommendations involve difficulties of implementation which have not been sufficiently considered, and if put into affect might produce undesirable effects.
3. Further discussion, research and experimental tryouts are required to set the future of education.

The problem areas appear to center around the relative newness of the attempts, thus preventing meaningful evaluation; problems inherent in society such as compatability with the achievement of equity; and work place availability and desirability.

Many other arguments center around procedural and methodological issues, such as, the achievement of career education through "infusion" into existing curriculum or by the addition (add-on) of separate courses directed specifically at career education. Other issues include the availability of proper counseling, job placement service, valid education, and the need to change certain "anti-intellectual" attitudes now held by many sectors of society.

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[5] Michael Timpane, Susan Abramowitz, Sue Berryman Bobrow, Anthony Pascal, Youth Policy in Transition. (Rand: Santa Monica, CA.) p.85.

Although there are shortcomings and problem areas involved with the institution of action-learning programs, the public school districts are devoting considerable effort and resources toward the renovation of the educational system. This is especially true in the large urban city schools where social issues such as unemployment, crime and racial tension have traditionally retarded the progress toward experiential learning.

The Urban Education Studies, in an effort to identify and examine successful action-learning programs in the urban setting, surveyed and made on-site visits to large urban school districts. The programs examined were grouped under the following categories:

Action-learning programs

a) provide students with on-the-job learning experience with business and industrial organizations

or

b) give the student the opportunity for voluntary service and community experiences.

A total of 103 programs were reported by twenty-nine school districts responding to the survey. Of those programs, 77 per cent were on-the-job learning in industry and business while only 23 per cent were voluntary/ community related. Student participation, if examined along racial structure, was comprised predominantly of minority members (53.3 per cent Black; 12.5 per cent Hispanic; 31.9 per cent white; 2.3,per cent other)

Using the results of the UES survey as a basis, on-site visits were made

to five of the participating districts. The purpose of the visits was to examine the successful programs (as designated by the school district) and derive trends that might contribute to their success.

The concept of action-learning is not considered a panacea for all of the problems confronting the city schools, however, the districts are very enthusiastic about the new alliance established between the community and school, and the number of career opportunities now available for their students. Based on the findings from the on-site visits to the five urban city districts and the data received from the reports of programs submitted by twenty-four other large city districts, certain trends in action-learning projects can be noted.

1. LARGE URBAN SCHOOLS ARE EMPHASIZING DIVERSITY OF CAREER OFFERINGS AND LIMITING THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS PER OCCUPATION.

   Action-learning programs offered in the large urban schools can best be characterized as being highly diverse. It has been realized that for the individual programs to be successful, the number of students trained for a specific occupation must be guided by the communities' needs. All of the school districts visited have established procedures for the projection of manpower requirements. If this is not accomplished, the program will decay due to the student's awareness of the difficulty in obtaining a position upon graduation.

   As a result of this process, the school districts have elected to provide a large number of highly diverse careers from which the student may select. An outstanding example of this diversification

is the Skyline Career Development Center and Magnet High Schools created by the Dallas Independent School District. The Skyline Center offers an education in twenty-three career clusters ranging from the skilled building trades to floral arranging to aircraft mechanics. All of these programs are centrally located with the student provided various options in attending the Center and his home school. In a continuing effort to provide diverse and comprehensive opportunities, Dallas has created six magnet high schools which have achieved notable success in the health related professions, the arts, and business and management fields. These high schools are open to all students in the district and are located centrally to the downtown area.

Diversification is further confirmed by the Milwaukee Career Speciality program offering twenty-seven career selections and more than fifty choices offered to the students in Toledo in their Skill Development Centers.

The types of programs include both paid and non-paid opportunities for the student. Although the latter is the most widely found form, some programs, such as the Respiratory Therapist program in the Oakland Unified School District, place the students in non-paying internships in the local hospitals. Here the students work in various areas related to their careers in respiratory therapy for forty hours per week for twenty-eight weeks. Other voluntary community services such as Candy Stripers in hospitals and work at senior citizens facilities are prime examples of non-paid action-learning opportunities.

2. CAREER EDUCATION IS BECOMING AN INTRICATE PART OF THE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT CURRICULUM. THE PREDOMINANT METHOD IS THE INFUSION OF CAREER MATERIAL INTO THE ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM WITH A TENDENCY TO PROVIDE ADD-ON INSTRUCTION AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL.

Many of the districts visited are adopting career education through infusion techniques. The Milwaukee Public Schools have entered into a Career Education Consortium with other districts across the nation. This program, in cooperation with the Ohio State University, is developing a curriculum for the lower grade levels. Dallas is also involved in an infusion pilot project in a predominantly minority sub-district. The project centers around staff development, community volunteers, and infused materials. The pilot project is directed at the K-12 grades.

One of the most successful programs in career education was observed in the Atlanta Public Schools. The Program of Educational Career Exploration (PECE) is a mandatory eighth-grade curriculum which provides instruction in career decision and life survival skills. Each student is provided ten weeks of intensive training infused with the social sciences and math program. In addition, they are provided on-the-job opportunities and visitations with their parents at their place of employment. This program's success can be contributed to a flexible scheduling process, team teaching efforts, and a highly dedicated and competent staff.

3. MANY OF THE PROGRAMS IN ACTION-LEARNING HAVE HAD THEIR ROOTS IN THE

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION REALM. THE DISTRICTS HAVE CAPITALIZED ON PAST SUCCESSES AND FAILURES IN THEIR PLANNING OF NEW PROGRAMS. With the implementation of innovative curriculum in the area of action-learning, some of the most successful programs remain the traditional vocational and cooperative education courses. The Milwaukee Technical High School is an outstanding example of a school designed to train students in the skilled and technical trades area. The Oakland Regional Occupation Centers -- Building Trades program develops building trade skills in students which eventually culminate in the construction of a residential house or portable classrooms to be used by the district.

It was found that the most comprehensive follow-up and student evaluation was being conducted in the long established Cooperative Education Programs. One of the keys to their success is the flexibility allowed the individual instructor. Release time enables them to follow-up student progress and secure employment positions for the students. The liaison between the instructor and employer is a critical element in these programs.

4. MANY OF THE DISTRICTS ARE BEGINNING TO REALIZE THAT MORE EFFORT MUST BE APPLIED TO THE COORDINATION OF PLACEMENT OF STUDENTS BY VARIOUS PROGRAMS WITHIN THE CURRICULUM, HOWEVER, LITTLE ACTION IS EVIDENT. The placement of students in on-the-job training positions connected with the action-learning programs is in most instances the responsibility of the instructor. It was not obvious that the districts were making

attempts at a unified system of placement or establishing procedures to enhance the coordination of placement. The Oakland schools have established a placement center which serves part-time student employment needs, which could easily be expanded to coordinate the entire action-learning placement activities.

5. THE ACTION-LEARNING MOVEMENT HAS BEEN TARGETED AT MAKING THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM MORE RESPONSIVE AND RELEVANT TO THE NEEDS OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AND SOCIETY IN GENERAL.

In some of the programs visited the maximum number of students being served was not being realized based on possible potential. In other programs, students were placed on waiting list. In many instances, the program was limited by design so as not to saturate the job market or positions available for on-the-job experience.

Data from the twenty-nine schools indicate a predominance of minority students in certain career clusters. This was also observed by on-site visitors. In most cases this can be explained in terms of past attitudes, stereotyping and available district population, however, in other instances, screening by past achievement has closed the program to certain disadvantaged students.

The urban school districts are confronting the issue of sex discrimination vigorously in the area of action-learning. Those programs reported in the twenty-nine city data indicate participation by females was 57 per cent. On-site visitations verified this report. In the Milwaukee Public Schools, the previously all male technical high school

now has an enrollment of 25 per cent female. In Atlanta, females are enrolling in the welding curriculum and the auto-mechanics courses. In addition, males are participating in the office education curriculum, but not with the same magnitude as females entering traditionally male dominated vocations.

The secondary student is the predominate age group in the action-learning programs. However, career education is being infused into the lower grade levels' curriculum, as evidenced in Dallas, Milwaukee, and Atlanta. The adult population, to include post secondary students, are the target of diverse educational programs which provide additional instruction or re-training for the movement from one vocation to another. A broad range of adult education is provided by the Oakland Schools in its Occupational Development Center which provides open entry- open exit for updating and retraining of skills connected with Office Operations. In addition, this program provides instruction in the basic skills for those needing it.

Large gains are being made in the mainstreaming of the handicapped into the basic curriculum. Exemplary programs can be found both in Toledo and Milwaukee. The Toledo Jefferson Center provides training in many occupations based onthe students' special capabilities. The renovation of the downtown Toledo post office has made an ideal setting for this program. The Milwaukee McKinley Vocational Assessment Center provides a diagnostic service which enables the correct

placement of the handicapped student. In addition, training and placement is being conducted with more than satisfactory results.

Many of the action-learning programs provide alternative modes of education for students not adapting to the traditional presentation. Various intern programs are offered to students with special skills in Dallas and Toledo, while Atlanta offers an Entrepreneur Program which allows the student to become familiar with independent business ownership. The Far West High School in the Oakland Unified School District provides opportunities for one-hundred and thirty students to select specific career patterns and develop extensive projects in conjunction with a community sponsor in that occupation. The student accomplishes his academic studies in an atmosphere which requires him to develop self reliance and control.

6. LARGE URBAN DISTRICTS ARE INCLUDING NON-CERTIFIED PERSONNEL IN THE ACTION-LEARNING PROGRAMS TO SUPPLEMENT THE LACK OF EXPERIENCE IN TRAINED EDUCATORS.

One of the traditional problem areas in action-learning situations is the lack of expertise and experience on the part of the teacher. In most cases the teacher has been educated in a college environment without any real experience in the world of work. The urban school districts visited are beginning to impact this problem. Two procedures are manifesting themselves: 1) the schools are placing students in work environments where the skilled workers can aid in training and practical applications. An alternate to this approach

is bringing the expert into the classroom for supplementary activities. 2) The second procedure is the school district's recruitment and hiring of professional and skilled workers, who may or may not have any formal education experience, to serve as instructors and administrators in the action-learning program. This latter method is being used very effectively by the Dallas schools. This district has employed skilled personnel in computers, the garment industry and the building trades to instruct students, only to name a few. In addition, they have drawn personnel from the legal and theatrical professions to administer two of their Magnet High Schools. These people are bringing up-to-date knowledge of their specific industry and its related equipment to the classroom. They have established contacts in the industry which provide information, resources, and possible student placement.

Other factors must be considered by the districts when incorporating non-certified personnel into the classroom, specifically the state laws governing certification and the position and strength of the local teachers' associations. In two of the cities visited, Toledo and Milwaukee, this latter issue was dominant.

The administration of the action-learning programs is carried out by a minimum number of personnel. In some cases, one person is responsible for twenty-three different career clusters located throughout the city. The pride which the districts display in

keeping their administrator-pupil ratio low is contributing to the lack of coordination and communication in many of the programs visited.

The school personnel involved with the action-learning programs are characterized by their enthusiastic dedication. In most cases they are actively involved in both planning and implementation. It could not be detected if this enthusiasm is being generated from job satisfaction or from the "halo" effect associated with innovation. However, many of the instructors in the area of Coop programs were very enthusiastic after many years in the same position.

7. LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE CAPITALIZING ON COMMUNITY RESOURCES THROUGH THE USE OF PUBLIC FACILITIES, ACTIVE ADVISORY COUNCILS AND AVAILABLE EXPERTISE.

The action-learning curriculum has provided an ideal opportunity for the capitalization of community resources and expertise. The use of community advisory committees for each career was the standard approach in all five school districts visited. The committees are composed of highly skilled workers and executives associated with a particular vocation within the community. These groups are contributing to the educational effort by:

a. Advising the school staff on technical requirements of the occupation and supplementing the school personnel's limited experience. This was very evident in the Oakland Schools' Auto-Insurance Regional Occupation curriculum in which the

Independent Insurance Agents Association requested the schools to establish such a program and then followed up with monetary and personnel support.

b. Obtaining needed resources as exhibited by the donations by a major network TV station of camera equipment for the Oakland Regional Occupations program in communication.

c. Providing inroads to student placement. The participation by organized labor on specific committees has illuminated many of the problems involved with the placement of students in the skilled building trades.

8. THE FACILITIES AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS PLAY AN INTRICATE PART IN THE SUCCESS OF ACTION-LEARNING PROGRAMS. An example of the excellent facilities provided by the districts are the Skill Centers constructed by the Toledo Public Schools. New physical additions and equipment have been added to each of nine existing facilities, each of which contains a specific occupational theme. Not only are the facilities excellent, Toledo has also achieved geographical diversification, a concept being implemented by the Milwaukee Public Schools in their Career Specialty Program.

The monetary support of the programs varies from district to district with respect to the amounts derived from the several sources; but are in most cases adequate in magnitude. The cost per student of action-learning programs, beyond the capital and facilities cost, is in most cases higher than the district's average per student cost. All of the

districts are devoting or securing large amounts of revenue to support the career and vocational programs. With considerable involvement of the community in the planning and implementation of the action-learning program comes both monetary and personnel support.

Many of the funds are obtained through the Federal Government's Vocational Education Act. The Toledo schools have constructed their Skills Centers from Federal funds funneled through the State Department of Education. Other Federally supported programs are becoming very successful in training students for employment. An excellent example of this is the Metro-Atlanta Skills Center Program supported by CETA funds in the Atlanta Public Schools. This project has an open entrance and open exit policy and is available for the training of students over eighteen years of age. The program has an 80 per cent successful placement rate. Administration of this program relies heavily on manpower requirement studies to govern their offerings — which range from welding to medical records transcribers.

Although the Federal Government plays a large role in the support of these programs (48 per cent of the programs reported contained Federal Components), many of the cities support their programs largely or solely on funds generated from local sources. The Oakland Unified Schools have entered into joint agreement with neighboring districts and have established Regional Occupation Centers which are open to students from all participating districts. These centers are supported through a special local levy authorized by the state legislature.

Conclusions

The relative success of the urban schools in implementing action-learning programs can be attributed partially to factors identified during the site visits. The following generalizations summarize some of the findings of the Studies:

1. Past experience in traditional vocational and occupational programs has been extended to a diverse and broad spectrum of career opportunities.
2. The objectives of action-learning programs are such that the community, students, industry and business are able to identify and support them.
3. The inclusion of personnel with practical work experience and the availability of resources, provides new dimensions and the flexibility required by the action-learning programs.

Hazards confront the implementation of a successful action-learning program; however, educators are more aware of them, thus enabling corrective actions to be implemented. Evaluation of action-learning programs is not matching the speed of innovation of new curriculum. The districts, to maintain credible standing, must devote more efforts to the substantiation of success of specific programs.

With a well defined need, community support, available resources and personnel, the urban school districts have the necessary ingredients to produce an impact on some of the problems of the cities. They have made much progress; but, they have far to go to achieve their goal.